CHAPTER II

THE SIN OF MONOTONY

One day Ennui was born from Uniformity.—MOTTE.

Our English has changed with the years so that many words now connote more than they did originally. This is true of the word *monotonous*. From "having but one tone," it has come to mean more broadly, "lack of variation."

The monotonous speaker not only drones along in the same volume and pitch of tone but uses always the same emphasis, the same speed, the same thoughts—or dispenses with thought altogether.

Monotony, the cardinal and most common sin of the public speaker, is not a transgression—it is rather a sin of omission, for it consists in living up to the confession of the Prayer Book: "We have left undone those things we ought to have done."

Emerson says, "The virtue of art lies in detachment, in sequestering one object from the embarrassing variety." That is just what the monotonous speaker fails to do—he does *not* detach one thought or phrase from another, they are all expressed in the same manner.

To tell you that your speech is monotonous may mean very little to you, so let us look at the nature—and the curse—of monotony in other spheres of life, then we shall appreciate more fully how it will blight an otherwise good speech.

If the Victrola in the adjoining apartment grinds out just three selections over and over again, it is pretty safe to assume that your neighbor has no other records. If a speaker uses only a few of his powers, it points very plainly to the fact that the rest of his powers are not developed. Monotony reveals our limitations.

In its effect on its victim, monotony is actually deadly—it will drive the bloom from the cheek and the lustre from the eye as quickly as sin, and often leads to viciousness. The worst punishment that human ingenuity has ever been able to invent is extreme monotony—solitary confinement. Lay a marble on the table and do nothing eighteen hours of the day but change that marble from one point to another and back again, and you will go insane if you continue long enough.

So this thing that shortens life, and is used as the most cruel of punishments in our prisons, is the thing that will destroy all the life and force of a speech. Avoid it as you would shun a deadly dull bore. The "idle rich" can have half-a-dozen homes, command all the varieties of foods gathered from the four corners of the earth, and sail for Africa or Alaska at their pleasure; but the poverty-stricken man must walk or take a street car—he does not have the choice of yacht, auto, or special train. He must spend the most of his life in labor and be content with the staples of the food-market. Monotony is poverty, whether in speech or in life. Strive to increase the variety of your speech as the business man labors to augment his wealth.

Bird-songs, forest glens, and mountains are not monotonous—it is the long rows of brown-stone fronts and the miles of paved streets that are so terribly same. Nature in her wealth gives us endless variety; man with his limitations is often monotonous. Get back to nature in your methods of speech-making.

The power of variety lies in its pleasure-giving quality. The great truths of the world have often been couched in fascinating stories—"Les Miserables," for instance. If you wish to teach or influence men, you must please them, first or last. Strike the same note on the piano over and over again. This will give you some idea of the displeasing, jarring effect monotony has on the ear. The dictionary defines "monotonous" as being synonymous with "wearisome." That is putting it mildly. It is maddening.

The department-store prince does not disgust the public by playing only the one tune, “Come Buy My Wares!” He gives recitals on a $125,000 organ, and the pleased people naturally slip into a buying mood.

How to Conquer Monotony

We obviate monotony in dress by replenishing our wardrobes. We avoid monotony in speech by multiplying our powers of speech. We multiply our powers of speech by increasing our tools.

The carpenter has special implements with which to construct the several parts of a building. The organist has certain keys and stops which he manipulates to produce his harmonies and effects. In like manner the speaker has certain instruments and tools at his command by which he builds his argument, plays on the feelings, and guides the beliefs of his audience. To give you a conception of these instruments, and practical help in learning to use them, are the purposes of the immediately following chapters.

Why did not the Children of Israel whirl through the desert in limousines, and why did not Noah have moving-picture entertainments and talking machines on the Ark? The laws that enable us to operate an automobile, produce moving-pictures, or music on the Victrola, would have worked just as well then as they do today. It was ignorance of law that for ages deprived humanity of our modern conveniences. Many speakers still use ox-cart methods in their speech instead of employing automobile or overland-express methods. They are ignorant of laws that make for efficiency in speaking. Just to the extent that you regard and use the laws that we are about to examine and learn how to use will you have efficiency and force in your speaking; and just to the extent that you disregard them will your speaking be feeble and ineffective. We cannot impress too thoroughly upon you the necessity for a real working mastery of these

principles. They are the very foundations of successful speaking. “Get your principles right,” said Napoleon,“ and the rest is a matter of detail.”

It is useless to shoe a dead horse, and all the sound principles in Christendom will never make a live speech out of a dead one. So let it be understood that public speaking is not a matter of mastering a few dead rules; the most important law of public speech is the necessity for truth, force, feeling, and life. Forget all else, but not this.

When you have mastered the mechanics of speech outlined in the next few chapters you will no longer be troubled with monotony. The complete knowledge of these principles and the ability to apply them will give you great variety in your powers of expression. But they cannot be mastered and applied by thinking or reading about them—you must practise, *practise*, *PRACTISE*. If no one else will listen to you, listen to yourself—you must always be your own best critic, and the severest one of all.

The technical principles that we lay down in the following chapters are not arbitrary creations of our own. They are all founded on the practices that good speakers and actors adopt—either naturally and unconsciously or under instruction—in getting their effects.

It is useless to warn the student that he must be natural. To be natural may be to be monotonous. The little strawberry up in the arctics with a few tiny seeds and an acid tang is a natural berry, but it is not to be compared with the improved variety that we enjoy here. The dwarfed oak on the rocky hillside is natural, but a poor thing compared with the beautiful tree found in the rich, moist bottom lands. Be natural—but improve your natural gifts until you have approached the ideal, for we must strive after idealized nature, in fruit, tree, and speech.

QUESTIONS AND EXERCISES.

1. What are the causes of monotony?
2. Cite some instances in nature.

3. Cite instances in man’s daily life.

4. Describe some of the effects of monotony in both cases.

5. Read aloud some speech without paying particular attention to its meaning or force.

6. Now repeat it after you have thoroughly assimilated its matter and spirit. What difference do you notice in its rendition?

7. Why is monotony one of the worst as well as one of the most common faults of speakers?